DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 378 275 UD 030 255

AUTHOR O'Keefe, Joseph M.
TITLE Crossing Boundaries of Race: Interpretations of the Experience of Low-Income Students of Color.
PUB DATE Apr 94
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New Orleans, LA, April 4-8, 1994). For a related document, see UD 030 251.
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Black Students; Disadvantaged Youth; Educational Environment; *Educational Experience; Educational Research; High Schools; *High School Students; *Low Income Groups; Private Schools; Racial Discrimination; *Racial Identification; Student Alienation; Student Attitudes; *White Students

ABSTRACT

Since the mid 1960s a number of affluent white schools, both public and private, have made efforts to include low-income students of color in their student bodies. Data on the attainment, professional status, and income of these students do not address the ambivalence many experience in white middle-class institutions. Those who have examined the feelings of these students have usually been white, middle-class academics themselves. The author, who conducted a study of the educational experiences of disadvantaged young men attending Catholic high schools on scholarship, asserts that white researchers who want to understand the experiences of students of color must begin by examining whiteness and the developmental dynamics of white racial identity. Stages of racial identity development for whites outlined by Helms (1991) and Tatum (1992) are explored, and the implications for white educators are traced. Educators must make efforts to move white students beyond the contact stage of little or no experience of color to the "disintegration" stage at which whites begin to acknowledge racism in a rudimentary way and beyond to later stages in understanding racism to the extent possible. (Contains 53 references.) (SLD)

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Crossing Boundaries of Race:
Interpretations of the Experience of Low-Income Students of Color.

Joseph M. O'Keefe, S.J.
Boston College

Annual Conference of the American Educational Research Association
New Orleans, Louisiana
April 1994

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Crossing Racial Boundaries

Since the mid 1960's a number of affluent White schools, both public and private, have made efforts to include low-income students of color into their student bodies. If success is measured by a generational increase in educational attainment, professional status and income, the literature indicates that these efforts have met their goal. (Barnds, 1988; Griffin and Johnson, 1988) However, these data do not describe the complex and deep ambivalence many of these young people experience in White middle-class institutions.

People of color have written autobiographical pieces on the topic of institutional exclusion. (Whittier, 1980; Pennington, 1983; Terris, 1985; Griffin and Johnson, 1988; Cary, 1991; Steele, 1992) White researchers have conducted studies of the same phenomenon. (Griffin, 1991; Zweigenhaft and Domhoff, 1991). The insufficient attention paid to authorship in these recent works -- White, middle-class academics examining the experience of low-income people of color -- illustrates a crucial challenge educators face today.

A recent edition of *Educational Researcher* featured an exchange among three authors about White perspectives on racism. (Allen, 1993; Scheurich, 1993 a, 1993 b; Sleeter, 1993b). The prominence of these pieces indicates that the educational research community is beginning to acknowledge that racism is an intractably difficult subject of study for those who enjoy White privilege. In this vein, one of the White authors, in a response entitled "A Difficult, Confusing, Painful Problem That Requires Many Voices, Many Perspectives" expressed his sadness at the suggestion of an African-American respondent that he is in fact reproducing the White racism he intends to oppose. (Scheurich, 1993 b, p. 16) I understand and share Scheurich's quandary.

In a paper entitled "No Strangers Here? A Study of the Experience of Low-Income Students of Color in High School," I present the findings of a qualitative, retrospective study of the experience of minorities in middle-class Catholic high schools. (O'Keefe, 1994). The title "No Strangers Here?" is indicative of the contemporary problem. The wall of the chapel of one of the schools is adorned with large felt commemorative banners made by students on retreat. One banner features a globe and the names of participants along with the inscription "No Strangers Here". The motto captures the espoused mission of the school: to be a nurturing culture for an ethnically and socially diverse group of students. One Puerto Rican alumnus put it, "The school made no bones about the fact that we were to serve our community and that we were all equal, and that we were all the same people, we all bled, we all breathed, we all ate." In reality, the experience recounted by alumni is ambiguous; in many ways students of color were estranged from the oft-touted school "family". Since there is frequently a discrepancy between the espoused vocation of a school and the lived reality of those who participate in its culture, the title of my study is in the interrogative form. As a White person I need to understand the

dynamics of oppression in a culture where people proclaim and legislate that racism is wrong. A school, of course, is a microcosm of society and "America is filled with attitudes, assumptions, stereotypes, and behaviors that make it virtually impossible for Blacks to believe that the nation is serious about its promise of equality." (Cose, 1993, p.5) The problem: How can a White researcher come to a respectful and profound understanding of the exclusion of children of color in White schools without reproducing imbedded racist attitudes? Subsequently, how can White educators create hospitable school environments?

After reading "No Strangers Here?" my colleague and co-presenter Ralph Edwards shared the response of other African-Americans and Latino colleagues: "You're studying the wrong people." In order to understand the dynamics of racism in schools White researchers need to shift genres -- from biography to autobiography.

Exploring Whiteness

Whiteness is a problem. I begin my exploration of the problem by a recognition of both systemic and personal racism. I also look at the links between racism and social-class oppression as a means of raising White consciousness. Turning to schools, I examine issues of resegregation, underrepresentation of adults of color and the subsequent need to raise the consciousness of White educators. Having established the reality of racism in society generally and in schools in particular, I focus on Whiteness itself. First, I explore broad sociocultural factors affecting Whiteness in the United States today. Second, I explore the developmental dynamics of White racial identity.

Racism is not chiefly a matter of unethical individual behavior; it is systemic. Racism is built on a shameful national legacy begun and perpetuated generations ago and whose effects are still felt today. Moreover, racist attitudes and behavior are so commonplace that they are often invisible to Whites. Because of the racism is imbedded in society, passivity and inaction constitute complicity. Sadly, even when Whites recognize the impact of racism on the victim, they do not acknowledge its impact on themselves. (Tatum, 1992, p. 5) Despite the evidence of systemic racism offered in large national studies (Jaynes and Williams, 1989), many Whites remain incredulous.

The personal testimony offered by victims of racial oppression challenges the incredulity of White observers. Recent popular studies can have a significant impact. (Terkel. 1992; Hacker, 1992; Staples, 1994). In *Rage of a Privileged Class* Ellis Cose provides graphic descriptions of what he calls the "dozen demons" that afflict African-Americans: inability to fit in; exclusion from the club; low expectations; shattered hopes; faint praise; presumption of failure; coping fatigue; pigeonholing; identity troubles; self-censorship and silence; mendacity; guilt by association. (1993, pp. 53-72) In a forthcoming book Sara Lawrence Lightfoot will

explore in more depth the experience of highly competent and successful African-Americans in contemporary U.S. society. This *genre* of literature proves that racial victimization exists independent of social-class status.

While racial discrimination is by no means limited to poorly educated members of the urban underclass, abundant evidence shows that they suffer acutely its effects. Along with statistics on income level and employment status, educational attainment figures show significant discrepancies. In 1988, for example, over 82% of Whites completed high school, whereas the percentage for Blacks was 76% and for Latinos 60%. (United States Department of Education, 1992, p. 58). The political and economic atmosphere of the 1980s had a devastating impact on urban people of color. (Massey & Denton, 1993) The Roman Catholic Bishops of the United States were prescient in their analysis of the attitude of the White majority:

> The minority poor are seen as the dross of post-industrial society - without skills, without motivation, without incentive. They are expendable. Many times the new face of racism is the computer print-out, the graph of profits and losses, the pink slip, the nameless statistic. Today's racism flourishes in the triumph of private concern over public commitment and personal fulfillment over authentic compassion. It is Christ's face that is the composite of all persons, but in a most significant way of today's poor, today's marginal people, today's minorities....As economic pressures tighten, those people who are often Black, Hispanic, Native American and Asian -- and poor -- slip further into the unending cycle of poverty, deprivation, ignorance, disease and crime. Racial identity is for them an iron curtain barring the way to a decent life and livelihood. (National Catholic Conference of Bishops, 1979, p. 13)

Schools keep the iron curtain in place. A recent study shows that the nation's schools are becoming resegregated -- low-income students of color predominate in urban districts while more affluent Whites maintain a majority in suburban districts and private schools. (Orfield, 1993) It is certain that children of privilege will not desegregate urban schools; the crossing of racial and class boundaries is a one-way movement up. At best, low-income students of color will be invited into White middle-class schools staffed and operated overwhelmingly by White, middle-class adults.

The absence of teachers of color in all schools "...is not good for anyone if we want to have schools reverse rather than reproduce racism." (Sleeter, 1993, p, 157) Along with redoubling efforts to recruit personnel of color, we must face the current reality and make central in pre-service curricula and staff development programs an exploration of Whiteness. There is some recent literature on teacher preparation and race (Francis-Okongwu & Pfaulm, 1993) but most of it focuses on helping students "bridge the chasm" between their White, middle-class

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background and urban schools (Weiner, 1993, p. 42) Certainly this work is important, but it does not go far enough since it limits the racial "problem" to institutions inhabited by the victims and neglects the need to educate the victimizers. White children need to see adults of color in professional roles. Moreover, if redoubled efforts by private schools to diversify the student body and public-school choice plans lead to a larger presence of children of color in White schools, the need for teachers of color in White institutions intensifies. On all counts, the nation cannot afford the on-going racial mismatch between students and adults.

An area overlooked by the literature on Whiteness is the education of the wide variety of non-teaching adults who function as "educators." Obviously, administrators play the most significant role and they are overwhelmingly White: 9/.1 % of the nation's superintendents; 93.2% of the secondary-school principals and 87.1% of the elementary-school principals. (Saks, 1992) In addition, one can assume that the majority of the tiny number of administrators of color are in schools with a large percentage of students of color. Consequently, administrators of color are virtually absent in White, affluent institutions. Sadly, White racial awareness is notably absent from the lively discussion about pre-service and in-service curricula for superintendents and principals.

Administrators are not the only non-teaching educators in today's schools. An important new model of schools is emerging, one in which a variety of professionals such as mental health personnel, social workers and nurse practitioners, play a central role in the life of the school. These professionals, largely White, also need to understand Whiteness. In addition, parents and other members of the community are taking an increasingly significant role in restructured schools. For example, the 1993 Educational Reform Bill of Massachusetts calls for the creation of a community council for every public school in the commonwealth. Business people especially are increasingly involved in schools through a variety of partnerships. In addition, many school choice plans will increase the involvement of a wide variety of citizens in the life of educational institutions. In this regard, it is especially sad that many citizens in affluent White communities neglect the needs of low-income minorities. (Galbraith, 1992) Henry Cisneros/for example, posited that the refusal of taxpayers without children to fund public schools at adequate levels is intensified when those children are black, brown, foreign or poor. (Cose, 1992, p. 224) Recent reform initiatives make urgent the need for White racial awareness.

The rapid pace of broad sociocultural change also calls for a new exploration of Whiteness. Generally speaking, the congruence of different factors leads to an *anomie* among many Whites today. Increasing mobility, for example, leads to a decline of regional identification. It also leads to ethnic homogenization; when people of non-British European descent leave their ethnic neighborhoods, their identification as Italians, Greeks, Irish, Poles,

Jews, etc. diminishes. (Alba, 1990). For some, this manifests itself in a loss of linguistic distinctiveness. For others, suburbanization leads to a loss of traditional religious identification. (Coleman, 1993). And since the tendency toward secularization is strongest among young adults, the trend will certainly continue in the future. (Hegy, 1993; Carter, 1993). For white ethnics, assimilation has lead to either no ethnic identification or a pseudo-ethnicity [the wearin' of the green on St. Patrick's Day for example] put on for certain holidays but never at the cost of on-going upward mobility. (Waters, 1991). The result is a lack of any distinctiveness, a rootlessness that raises serious dilemmas about what it means to be a White American. (Walzer, 1991). One consequence of not having a strong positive identity ethnic is the tendency to define oneself as <u>not</u> the other; <u>not</u> non-White.

Another consequence of not having a strong positive ethnic group identity is the emergence of vacuous groupings of people who come together not because of shared meaning and values but because of accidents of history. Bellah *et al* , in their landmark work on the White middle-class, call these groupings lifestyle enclaves, as opposed to more substantive and enduring communities of memory. (1985) The lack of cohesiveness among members of the White majority has given rise to much discussion of community. In their more recent work, Bellah *et al* call for renewal of traditional institutions to bring people together into meaningful associations. The nation is also witnessing the birth of new movement called communitarianism (Etzioni, 1993), a yearning for a gathering of people with history and a future, who have shared expressions of ultimate meaning and human purpose. Even the current presidential administration makes extensive use of communitarian themes and language. All of this is to say that the hallmark of contemporary White identity, a hallmark that no one seems happy with, is equation of the "person" with "autonomous individual," an exaggerated and attenuated form of classical liberalism that grows from a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant capitalistic ethic. The belief is: I have no responsibility for anyone else, I am not even my brother's keeper, I certainly am free of any sense that the systemic oppression of others is my affair. (Scheurich, 1993a) One goal predominates -- "my" achievement of the American Dream.

For many, the quest for the American Dream has become a nightmare. Today's young adults, often called "Generation X," believe that they will never reach the economic status of their parents. Social-science literature is replete with theories about the downward mobility of the U.S. citizenry. (Lasch, 1991; Newman, 1993; Phillips, 1993). Cornell West explains:

> After 1973, with the crisis in the international world economy, America's slump in productivity, the challenge of OPEC nations to the North Atlantic monopoly of oil production, the increasing competition in hi-tech sectors of the economy from Japan and West Germany and the growing fragility of the international

> debt structure, the USA entered a period of waning self-confidence and a nearly contracting economy. (1993, p. 15).

Moreover, as the increasing level of violence in Western Europe indicates, White backlash is a common response to downward mobility. Many people point to the increase of racist incidents and the candidacy of David Duke as domestic examples. At worst, White racism will lead to violent outbreaks; unless there is a change of attitude among educators and the public at large, at best the more subtle racism of the status quo will perdure.

Helms (1991) and Tatum (1992) have developed stages of racial identity development for people of color and for Whites. The stages for Whites are: **Contact**, **Disintegration**, **Reintegration**, **Pseudo-Independent**, **Immersion**, and **Internalization**. In the **Contact** stage Whites have little or no direct experience of people of color; they form their judgments through traditional images and current media portrayals. In my experience, the vast majority of White Americans never move beyond this stage. In the words of Gary Howard, they enjoy the "luxury of ignorance." (1993, p.39) The number of Whites in the **Contact** stage will increase because of continuing geographic segregation and low intermarriage rates (Jaynes & Williams, 1989) along with the resegregation of schools. (Orfield, 1993). An African-American's critique of the unacknowledged absence of people of color in *Habits of the Heart* provides a good scholarly example of the **Contact** stage. (Harding, 1988) Ample anecdotal evidence also concurs. For example, in my class of thirty graduate students, the vast majority have never had an African-American teacher and a significant number attended all-White schools.

In the next stage, **Disintegration**, Whites begin to acknowledge racism in a rudimentary way, especially through victims' narratives. The ideology of a just society begins to crumble. This confusion and disorientation are necessary for forward movement. However, potent dynamics -- problem fatigue and guilt (Hacker, 1992) -- lead most Whites to the next stage, **Reintegration**, a reshaping of the belief system to be more congruent with racism. The various manifestations of backlash most powerfully illustrate this stage. There are also less violent manifestations, for example: repudiation of affirmative action (Fish, 1993), passivity, blaming the victim, characterizing African-American males as predators, racist jokes.

In my estimation, few White Americans have overcome the pull of **Reintegration**. The fourth stage, **Pseudo-Independence**, is marked by the denial of race as a salient factor in human relations (Roman, 1993).. Lorene Cary describes the phenomenon eloquently:

> "Well, as for as I'm concerned," one [White] girl after another would say, "it doesn't matter to me if somebody's white or black or green or purple. I mean people are just people." The motion, having been made, would invariably be seconded, "Really, I mean, it's the person that counts." Having castigated whites' widespread inability to see individuals for the skin in which they

> were wrapped, I could hardly agree with 'it's the person that counts.' I don't know why they always chose green and purple to dramatize their indifference, but my ethnicity seemed diminished when the talk turned to muppets. It was like they were taking something from me. "I'm not purple." What else could you say? (1991, pp. 83-84)

Pseudo-Independence is also marked by the White ersatz ethnicity described earlier. The belief that everyone has ethnicity and all ethnicities are good and equal is dangerous because it "...denies the significance of visible, physiological marks of ancestry and harsh subjugation that Europeans and Euroamericans extended over other peoples." (Sleeter, 1993 a, p. 16) While I wholeheartedly believe that cultural homogeneity is impoverished and that beauty of many cultures warrants attention (Greene, 1993), another danger at this stage is a facile multi-culturalism that denies the political and economic reality of racism. A superficial identification with the victims of racism, commonly called the "wannabe" phenomenon [and a variety of ugly, repugnant labels], is also typical. Finally, facile empathy, a belief that all forms of oppression are fundamentally the same, impedes progress. White women, for example, have grappled with the relationship between racism and sexism (McIntyre, 1992; Sleeter, 1993b). White people must be mindful of patronizing attitudes and the assumption of superiority. Christian Neira, a low income Latino attending an affluent White high school in New York, offers a powerful caution: "Poised between two different worlds, I have learned that the emotional power of some experiences can never be conveyed to another. Outsiders can begin to appreciate that which is foreign to them when they realize that they will never fully understand." (1988, p. 342)

Two final stages are less salient. At the **Immersion** stage Whites look to role models, anti-racists who have had a significant positive impact. Unfortunately, they are few in number; careful, critical reflection about Whiteness is at an embryonic point. In the final stage, **Internalization**, a person becomes racially self-actualized. In my view, both of these stages are theoretical and underdeveloped. Since so few Whites exhibit these traits, these theories cannot stand up to the critique of practice.

Implications for White Educators

Research on racism conducted by Whites can in fact be counterproductive. At best, research remains ineffectual -- scholars talking to scholars about their scholarship. The truth that White people in the United States can never understand racial victimization can lead to silence, paralysis and neglect. Based on my reflections, I nonetheless present the following implications for White educators:

• Educational researchers must foster **Disintegration** through evocative narrative about the experience of victims, especially given the large number of Whites at the **Contact** stage.

• Interracial reflection and dialogue is crucial. Scholars of color and White scholars must struggle together if their work is to foster equity and social reconstruction. The exchange in *Educational Researcher* (Allen, 1993; Scheurich, 1993 a, 1993 b; Sleeter, 1993b) and the session today provide starting points.

• Whites need to learn the history of systemic racial oppression. For example, a White historian changed his orientation because of the centrality of race "... in defining how White workers look not only at Blacks but at themselves; the pervasiveness of race; the complex nature of hate, sadness and longing in the racist thought of White workers; the relationship between race and ethnicity." (Roediger, 1991, p. 3)

• Race must be redefined. Raymond Williams, for example, writes that "...race has been used alongside both *genus* and *species* in classificatory biology, but all its difficulties began in the nineteenth century when it is used to denote a group *within* a species." Social Darwinism encouraged racism because "...scientific evidence of variable heredity was mixed with and often overridden by pre-scientific notions of 'pure racial stocks' and of the inheritance, through blood or race, of culturally acquired characteristics." (Williams, 1976, pp. 248-250). Though many recognize race as a sociohistoric construct, they still treat it as an objective condition. (Omi & Winant, 1993)

• The global perspective on race is increasingly important because of communications technology, ease of travel, an internationalized private sector, the decline of Euroamerican market dominance, and high rates of immigration into the United States.

• Highest priority must be given to diversify school personnel at all levels and in all sectors.

• Universities have an obligation to foster a habit of critical social analysis among White middle-class educators, both in pre-service curricula and in on-going professional development.

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